

Shalom Bayis Newsletter - Issue 3

Interactions Impact Perceptions

A few years ago, I conducted a survey of frum divorced singles. The impetus for it was triggered by my work in the field of child sexual abuse prevention. I had come across some research that indicates that a child's risk of falling victim to sexual abuse becomes elevated in the aftermath of divorce (<https://core.ac.uk/download/pd...>), so I felt that it is important to begin garnering some empirical data on the phenomenon of divorce specifically within the frum community with a particular aim on trying to get a handle on some of the major risk factors for divorce.

One of the fascinating findings that emerged from that survey is an apparently puzzling dichotomy between the responses to the following two questions (there were a total of 48 questions; I'm just focusing on these two for the purpose of this newsletter).

Question One - "Once you became used to being married, how much effort did you put forth on an ongoing basis to be attractive to your ex-spouse and keep up a good impression (for example, by dressing well, exercising good manners, etc.)?" The answer options to this question were: "none at all", "very little", "some", "a significant amount", or "a lot".

Question Two - "How often did you and your ex-spouse spend quality time together alone? (e.g. playing games, schmoozing, going out for a walk, taking a vacation, going out to eat, etc.)." The answer options to this question were, "never", "very infrequently", "occasionally", "often", or "very often".

The results?

For question number one, fully 61.2% of survey participants responded that they put forth either "a significant amount" (43.6%) or "a lot" (17.6%) of effort to maintain attraction. 32.4% of the survey participants responded that they put forth "some" effort. And only 6.4% of the survey participants

responded that they had exerted either "very little" or "none at all" effort to maintain attraction.

But for question number two, the results paint a very different picture. Only 34.3% of survey participants responded that they had spent quality time together alone "often" (27.9%) or "very often" (6.4%). 37.3% of the survey participants responded that they had spent quality time together alone "occasionally". And 28.4% of the survey participants responded that they had spent quality time together alone either "very infrequently" or "never".

What seems to emerge, then, is that within this cohort of frum divorced singles there were far more people who made maintaining attraction an action-executed priority than those who made spending quality time alone an action-executed priority.

Now, does this dichotomy have to do with assumptions that actionable maintenance of attraction is more important to a marriage than spending quality time together alone, could it perhaps be a function of the latter simply being much more practically difficult to execute than the former, is it a combination of the two factors, or could there be some other explanation - I don't think that my survey would suffice to answer that question.

But consider the following quote from a 2021 paper entitled, "Time Spent Together in Intimate Relationships: Implications for Relationship Functioning" (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/p...>).

"Within couples, individuals who reported spending more time interacting with their partner also reported greater experienced closeness...Couples who spent a greater proportion of time talking to one another reported significantly higher relationship satisfaction, [perceived] more positive qualities in their marriage, and more desired and experienced closeness. Within couples, partners who reported spending more time talking to their partners had less perceived negative qualities in their marriage, more desired and experienced closeness, and greater use of constructive communication."

Now, the paper concedes that "it is unclear whether...couples communicate more effectively...because they spend more time interacting, or whether they are able to spend more time interacting because they communicate in a more positive way." However, bottom line, the study clearly indicates that

greater constructive communication is closely correlated with a greater amount of together time. And, at the very least, this study indicates the possibility that spending more quality time together directly impacts the degree of positive perception that each spouse has of his/her spouse and the marriage in general.

This would certainly seem to dovetail well with the results of my study that indicate that frum marriages that end in divorce seem to have a significantly lower amount of together-time than other things such as attraction-maintenance efforts. It seems entirely possible to posit, then, that despite an overall positive marriage work-ethic regarding things such as high levels of attraction-maintenance efforts, if couples don't make a point to have a sufficient amount of together-time, they may be at risk of experiencing higher degrees of negative perceptions about their spouse and their marriage.

Conversely, if couples do make a point to have a sufficient amount of together-time on an ongoing basis, they have better chances of having more positive perceptions of their spouse and their marriage.

Put in a perhaps somewhat crass manner, even if your wife regularly dresses to the nines for you, but the two of you don't spend all that much quality time together, you may find that she may not "look" all that good to you. Likewise, if your husband is particular to dress well, stay in shape, and behave and speak like a respectable gentleman, he still may not "look" all that good to you if you rarely spend quality time together.

And, on the other hand, even if your spouse is not on the higher end of the spectrum in the attraction-maintenance department, if the two of you make sure to spend sufficient quality-time together, you may find that you "look" great to one another nonetheless.

So, I guess the bottom line of this week's newsletter is, stop reading this and go for a walk with your spouse. Even if he doesn't have a clean shirt to change into or she doesn't have energy to put on makeup. :)

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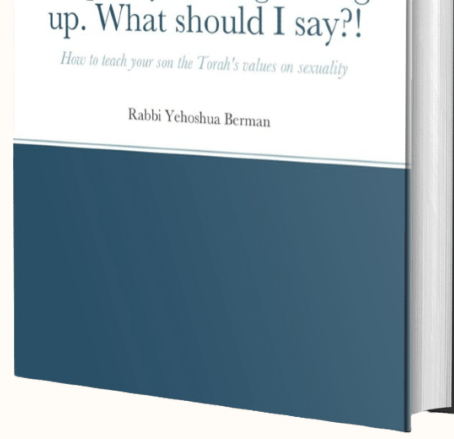
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